HAD YOU BEEN BORN A MUSLIM

(Growing Up a Muslim)

by

T.B. Irving

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PREFACE

Professor T. B. Irving needs no introduction. He is a Muslim from Canada, now teaching in the United States, and has written many books on various aspects of Islam. His views are widely read and respected in the Muslim world.

Professor Irving has very kindly agreed to allow us to publish some of his beautiful writings in the form of pamphlets for wide distribution, this being the second of a series.

We are grateful to Almighty Allah for having given us this opportunity and pray that this humble effort on our part may mark the beginning of a long and pleasant cooperation between us in furthering the Cause of Allah, Ameen.

July, 1976

M. A. Qazi
for Kazi Publications
1647 N. Wells St.
Chicago, Ill. 60614

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("Growing Up a Muslim")

NOTE: This pamphlet has been prepared by:
Mr. Abdullah Igram of Cedar Rapids, Iowa,
Founder of the Federation of Islamic Associations
in the United States and Canada;
and
Dr. T. B. Irving,
Professor at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.
It was intended originally for distribution
at mosques and Islamic Centers in North America
to non–Muslims who are interested in Islam.

Had you been born a Muslim, one of your earliest recollections would be a prayer which begins: "In the name of God, the Mercygiving, the Merciful!"

You would remember that you had learned this literally at your mother's knee. You heard your father using it, and he told you it was the beginning chapter of your holy book, the Nọble Qur'ān. It was an inspiring prayer, and it remains with you today, helping in the important moments of your life:

In the name of God, the Mercy-giving, the Merciful!

Praise be to God, Lord of the Universe,
the Mercy-giving, the Merciful,
Ruler on the Day for Repayment!
You do We worship, and You do we ask for Help;
guide us along the Straight Road,
the road of those whom You have favored,
with whom you are not angry,
nor who are lost!

Amen (The Opening 1:1–7)

This prayer is with you even now, just as the call to prayer which was whispered in your ear at birth, long before you can remember anything:

God is Greatest;

God is Greatest;

God is Greatest;

God is Greatest!

I swear there is no deity but God;

I swear there is no deity but God.

I swear Muḥammad is the Prophet of God;

I swear Muḥammad is the Prophet of God.

Hasten to prayer;

hasten to prayer!

Hasten to success;

hasten to success!

God is Greatest;

God is Greatest!

There is no deity but God;

there is no deity but God!

You have heard this countless times, five times a day if you lived within earshot of a mosque. In the place of worship where your parents took you to pray in public, you saw the Imām or Islāmic leader (who performs the same duties as a Protestant minister in Britain or North America) raise his hands and lift his voice to say: "In the name of God, the Mercy-giving, the Merciful!" Then you followed him with your lips and heart.

Whenever the Imām was not there, or when you were with a group of Muslims who had no such leader, the oldest or most learned man among you led the prayers. For Islām is democratic, and it forms its leaders from within its own membership. It is a pious faith that breeds men of ability.

These childhood memories put you in touch with a larger world, a world of trancendental reality. They taught you other things which all men should know and must respect. Many times as a child, you thought about your father's and your mother's words, and connected them with something higher and mysterious, with lofty things you felt things you felt but could not fully understand: the distant sky that matched the tiled blue of some mosques, the beauty of nature, the joy of living, and the love of your parents, of your relatives and friends. But most of all, they brought your feelings back to your place of worship, to the mosque; and they brought the ever-recurring name and attributes of God into your mind.

Something about public worship was different from everything else on earth. People were different when they came to pray together. Your parents were different. Whenever they approached the place of prayer, they became silent and reverent, for they had prepared themselves by righteous thought and by cleansing themselves physically as well as spiritually. This was understandable because our places of worship are wondrously beautiful with their golden domes and soaring minarets, and their cool vaults and corridors where men can pray and meditate. Even the softness of the carpets made you feel at home as you settled down on them.

In cities where Muslims predominate, such as Casablanca, Algiers, Damascus, Cairo, Istanbul, Isfahan, Labore, Jakarta, the mosques defy description. You heard it said that God is met within them in a special way, just as He is met within a special way at Mecca, in the sacred enclosure of the Ka'ba. God is the One Who made the heavens and the earth, and His temples are His home, where men may meet Him. For this reason, they should be beautiful and comforting.

When you were very young, you learned to love the mosque, and you too became reverent whenever you neared one. You were taught to take your shoes off and leave them with the porter in the doorway, or to carry them in your hand and place them in the aisle by your side, since you and your fellow worshippers would soon bow down and touch your foreheads to the floor in humbleness before God. Thus the ground before you must be neat and clean whenever you wanted to pray.

No one ever prays nor even goes near a mosque unless he is scrupulously clean. It is easier to commune with God in that way, for

you are prepared to meet Him; while once you are ready for prayer, you will not want to change that start by performing any unclean or dishonest action: "Prayer restrains one from sexual misconduct and wickedness" says the Qur'ān in The Spider (29:45). So if you were not ready when you approached the mosque, then you went to the fountain or washroom by the entrance and prepared yourself for worship.

Then only did you enter the great hall and kneel down in reverence, facing the prayer-niche which showed you the Direction of the holy centre of Mecca, whither all Muslims face when they pray. You said the prayers you needed, or if it were Friday noon, then you waited for the leader to come and mount the pulpit, where he preached his sermon. When divine service was over, you shook hands with your friends and acquaintances, and all of you went your several ways with a better feeling in your hearts. God regards them as

> . . . men whom neither business nor trading
> distract from remembering God,
> keeping up prayer, and paying the welfare tax.
>
> (Light 24:37)

In the holy month of Ramaḍān when everybody fasts throughout the daylight hours, you might feel like resting for a while, as many people do, in the peaceful corridors of the mosque. The mosques are dull during Ramadān: full of merchants, porters, students, workmen, civil servants, kneeling or reclining in the corridors or on the rich carpets. Your mind would follow your eye as it wandered along the arabesques upon the wall, tracing out verses from the Noble Qur'ān. You thought of God through them; they were the selfsame words your parents had taught you from the holy book, and now they conforted you.

*　　　*　　　*

This is how Islam affected you as a child. But when you grew to manhood, you found that Islam is a man's religion, a complete way of life, and this helped you face the world with all of its reality. The manliest of your friends were those who went to the mosque on Fridays too, and met God there. You found a source of strength in your five daily prayers and your other practices, which now became

more meaningful to you. At times you might not be able to say all five of your prayers, And on those occasions you hoped that whatever you had been engaged in would be some activity which would find favor in God's sight.

You reflected how you always faced Mecca in these prayers, that unseen city in distant Arabia, and you hoped that some day you would have the strength and means to make the Pilgrimage. Occasionally you would hear the story of some pilgrim who had seen the holy city, and always it would be the same tale, of Muslims from the four corners of the earth and every race who gathered there. If you moved about in the world because of business or travel, you could observe how the Direction of the prayer-niche would change in every mosque you visited. In India, for instance, they face the west; in North Africa and America, they all face east; in Syria and Turkey, it is south; while in Yaman and East Africa, they look towards the north when they pray. This brings men together in their thoughts and acts, five times a day.

When the time for marriage came upon you, you felt a need to assume wider responsibility. As in the other solemn moments of your life, you consulted with your family and told them that you wanted to have a helpmeet in your life. If your family and her family had been good Muslims, then your wife was also one, and she raised your children just as your mother had raised you, to be God-fearing and pious. Marriage brought home to you the human need of association and companionship, and the duty that all men have in fulfilling their obligations towards their wives, their children and their community. Marriage is a contract, something which you yourself must honor, both before God and the world, and within yourself.

Non-Muslims tend to laugh at times, and make remarks about Islāmic marriage, but that is because they do not understand it. They think Muslims always want four wives, and the first question they put to a Muslim in any discussion is about this matter, as if it were more on their minds than it is on ours. Yet I scarcely know of any Muslim who has more than one wife, and I have never known one from a country where this is forbidden. For a Muslim must honor the laws of any country which is not tyrannous and which respects Islām. Moreover, Muslims always recognize all of their children, and in some lands there are offspring who are termed illegitimate, as if God or the law did not care to recognize them. How are they born if God did

not will it? Thus Muslims honor marriage solemnly, for it is the basis of their society.

Similarly outsiders seem to be interested in the Islāmic paradise, and can quote about the women they want to find there, whereas Muslims look to Heaven as a shady place through which rivers flow, and where good men and women can rest till the end of time:

> O tranquil soul,
> return to your Lord
> pleasing and well-pleased!
> Enter among My servants,
> and enter My garden.

(Daybreak 89:27-30)

Paradise is where we hope to come when life is over on this earth for us, and each man receives his just reward. God is Merciful, as we should be merciful ourselves; He does not require the impossible of us: "God only assigns a soul something it can cope with."

(The Cow 2:286)

> Anyone who comes with a fine deed
> will have ten more like it,
> while anyone who comes with an evil deed
> will only be rewarded with its like;
> they will not be treated unjustly.

(Livestock 6:161)

We must look out for ourselves, since we do not believe in the strict predestination which non-Muslim writers accuse us of: the Prophet himself once told a man who took an exaggerated view of God's protection: "Tie your camel; then trust in God." We are taught to be kind to our enemies too: "Repay evil with something that is finer" (Believers, 23:96); although we are enjoined to defend ourselves in case of attack. The *Jihād* or struggle in God's way, however, means striving to be good and useful more often than it means a "holy war". We are likewise taught tolerance; our Book says: "Do not insult those they appeal to instead of to God, lest they insult God as an enemy without even realizing it" (Livestock 6:109); and "There should be no compulsion in religion. Normal behavior has been distinguished from error" (The Cow 2:256). We, in fact, respect all the prophets,

but we never worship any of them, for they were only human, and had their moments of agony and doubt too.

* * *

Our Book, the Noble Qur'ān, tells us these truths. It is a document which God revealed to our Prophet Muḥammad when he was troubled about his nation's morals; through it, he led them away from the worship of their many images, and taught them to concentrate their faith on One God only, on the worship of God Alone: ". . .my Lord has guided me along a Straight Road [leading to] an established religion, the sect of Abraham the Enquirer. He was no associator [of other deities with God Alone]" (Livestock 6:162).

This Book is full of inspiring passages, and it comprehends truth on a vast scale, you can follow Muḥammad's spiritual struggle through his dark moments and in the days of victory and rejoicing. Our faith lifts us in the great moments of our lives and helps us through our hardships, when we can pray:

In the name of God, the Mercy-giving, the Merciful!

I take refuge with the Lord of Mankind,
the King of Mankind,
the God of Mankind,
from the evil of the stealthy Whisperer
who whispers in the breasts of Mankind,
whether among sprites or Mankind. (Mankind 114:1-6)

Life is hard at times, but it is also gloriously beautiful. Difficulty and evil, once they are viewed as part of the inescapable conditions of our existence, do not necessarily make living unendurable, nor does virtue thereby become meaningless and happiness unattainable. Men and women can move with delight into achievement after troubles, just as travellers come out of a cold night into a warm and lighted hostel, or sailors are delivered from a wild storm into a spell of tranquil weather. We find ourselves fortunate just to be alive and released from worry, and take heart to laugh together and practise our good manners. Always we feel the presence of God, expressed in those generous concepts which guide us through our lives:

God! There is no deity except Him,
the Living, the Eternal!

Slumber does not overtake Him, nor does sleep.
What the Heavens hold and what Earth holds
[belong] to Him. Who is there
to intercede with Him except by His permission?
He knows what lies before them and what's behind them,
while they embrace nothing of His knowledge
except whatever He may wish.
His Seat extends over Heaven and Earth;
preserving them both does not overburden Him.
He is the Sublime, the Almighty! **(The Cow 2:285)**

There are other passages with great majesty in them:

If only the trees on earth were pens
and the [inky] sea were later on replenished
with seven other seas, God's words
would never be exhausted;
God is Powerful, Wise! **(Luqmān 31:27)**

Thus we find strength in our religion, in Islām, that factor in our lives which brings us *salām* or peace. A Muslim is literally someone who has made this peace with God. Islām imbues us with a soul which is deeply spiritual. By this I mean that we learn to meet the Unknown in the Universe with reverence, and mankind with tolerance, and that we accept our destiny with thankfulness and fortitude. There is one Unity running through the world, which always brings us back to reality; this Oneness we call God, Who presides over the affairs of the Universe. God is described in another prayer:

In the name of God, the Mercy-giving, the Merciful!

SAY: "God is Unique!
God is the Source [for everything]:
He has not fathered anything
nor is He fathered, and there
is nothing comparable to Him!" **([God's] Oneness, 114:1-4)**

Moreover our faith built up a magnificent culture when much of the world, the Western part especially, was undergoing what is called the middle ages. In those days, Islām was the unifying force in civilization, and it kept the world in touch from the borders of China to the Pyrenees. This is how the manufacture of silk and paper were intro-

duced to Spain, and the neglected classics of Greece and India began to be taught again in Baghdad and Cordoba, and then in Paris and Oxford. We are proud of this heritage, and we cherish it.

We are not afraid of our future, for we have fallen low and we have risen. Today, if God wishes, we are once more becoming a moral force in the world. We are grateful to be Muslims, for God is Greater than us, and through Him we move through the world. All this is what comes into our minds when someone asks us what it feels like to be born a Muslim.

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